



Organizational Communication

Greg G. Armfield
New Mexico State University

College students often comment about struggling with the concept of organizational communication. The primary reason for this is that college students have had limited organizational experiences and those experiences that you had involved little interaction with an organizations culture. The typical college student and high school student has worked a myriad of part-time jobs, many of which will not be related to your career choice. For example, my first paid job, that was not for my father's business, was washing dishes for a Chinese restaurant. My second job was making shakes and flipping burgers at a fast-food restaurant call Braum's. By the time I was a traditional college student I was working for a retail drug store. Not until I moved into a part-time management role at that drug store was I really engaged with the culture of the organization. The typical student who waits tables, stocks shelves, or works fast-food collects a check and is relatively oblivious of the organization's culture. Furthermore, the typical part-time employee is not included in organizational decisions and typically only receives vertical downward communication while participating minimally in horizontal communication.

However, the reality is that unless you are literally a hermit you are affected by an organization every day of your life. Even if you are self-employed, work by yourself, or are unemployed, you interact with organizations. Did you wake up to an alarm clock this morning? It was made by an organization. Did you take a shower? Brush your teeth? Drink a glass of water? The water you used was most likely supplied by your local municipality. The same goes for the electricity or gas that you used to heat your water. Did you eat? Unless you grow your own food, your meal was the product of a complex system of organizations working together to bring that meal to you. For these reasons, it's important to learn about organizational communication so that you are better prepared to assimilate into organizational life.

TYPES OF ORGANIZATIONS

There are three common types of organizations. The most common is the for-profit organization. For-profit organizations are primarily concerned with making money or net profits. This includes private, employee owned, and publicly traded companies. The second type of organization is nonprofit. A nonprofit organization focuses on providing services or products without the goal of making money or turning a profit. The last type of organization is a not-for-profit organization. This type of organization can sell goods and services at higher rates than are needed for organizational stability (unlike

a true nonprofit) without the desire to truly make a profit (unlike a for-profit). All funds that exceed organizational stability (salaries, supplies, property, etc.) in a not-for-profit organization are donated back to a true nonprofit organization (Richmond & McCroskey, 2009).

DEFINING AN ORGANIZATION

While there are numerous definitions of organizations the following four provide a nice picture of how organizations function very much like an individual in society. First, **legally** an organization is viewed as an artificial person having entity status under the law. The organization, regardless of its size or status, holds the same rights, privileges, and obligations of humans. It is entitled to hold property, remains subject to search and seizure, is privileged to expand business and secure contracts, obligated to pay taxes and to comply with legal judgments and courts (Brummer, 1991).

Communicatively an organization is a social context where symbols are exchanged to create social reality and shared meaning. Communication is a central process in the creation, maintenance, and extension of collective organizational meaning (Seeger, 1997). Third, **socially**, an organization is responsive and responsible to the public. Finally, organizations are **unique** in size and complexity and have a unique culture with its own norms, values, and symbols. All of these definitions imply that organizational communication is the process of creating, exchanging, interpreting (improperly or not), and storing messages inside a system of human relationships and interactions (Jablin, 1990). Note that the central piece of this definition is the process of communication or the exchange of symbols.

Communication is a way to describe an organization in the sense that Conrad (1985) identified three functions that communication performs in organizations: ambiguity, command, and relational. The ambiguity management function illustrates that organizations are ripe with uncertainty. An example of the ambiguity that encompasses many organizations is the current economic climate. School districts nationwide are making budget cuts commonly thought to be based on inaccurate, at best, economic predictions. Specifically, numerous colleges and local K-12 school districts in 2009, 2010, and 2011 made future business plans based on predictions of three or five percent or more economic downturns when the reality in 2010 was much worse for several states when the 2011 fiscal year ended. Many academic colleges are facing, or have already faced, budget cuts, forced faculty furloughs, and increased service loads all while enrollment continues to increase. Communication is the means by which organizational members make sense and cope with the uncertainty and ambiguity that is inherent in organizations. Through gaining and sharing information, organizational members attempt to add structure to the organizational environment.

The command function allows organizational members to “issue, receive, interpret, and act on commands” (Conrad, 1985, p. 7). The command function of organizational communication tends to come in the form of directions in downward communication in order to coordinate and influence the outcome of the many interdependent functions of organizational members.

The final function is that of relational. Conrad (1985) states that organizational members use communication “to create and maintain productive business and personal relationships with other members of the organization” (pp. 7–8). Organizational relationships differ in the set of communication characteristics and challenges in the way that formal and informal organizational relationships exist. In most work settings, organizational employees are identified by title and/or role in the organization. For example, department manager, regional manager, vice-president, regional or divisional manager, store manager, divisional manager, management trainee, assistant manager, associate manager, vice-president, senior vice-president, executive vice-president, etc. The importance of relational communication skills cannot be overstated. In a recent interview David E. Van Zandt, Dean of Northwestern University School of Law stated, “in addition to strong academic abilities, they (an ideal

candidate for law school) have solid interpersonal and communication skills, which are necessary for success" ("Interview with," n.d.).

Furthermore, a recent survey by the Public Forum Institutes listed interpersonal communication skills as the most important skill a candidate should possess beating out job specific or technical skills. The challenge of developing relationships within organizations involves the rules set forth for appropriate communication channels with upward, downward, or horizontal communication. Many organizational communication rules are unwritten and dictated by the unique culture of the organization. Organizational culture will be address later in this chapter.

COMMUNICATION NETWORKS

There are two major communication networks or patterns of communication that exist in organizations. The two types of networks are formal and informal.

Formal Communication Networks

Formal communication is a system designed by management to dictate who should talk to whom. In small businesses the formal network may even go unnoticed. However, in larger organizations networks are more sophisticated and follow officially established channels. A common way to think about communication networks is to think of an organizational chart. If you visit the Department of Homeland Security at <http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/dhs-orgchart.pdf> you can see a representation of the primary organizational structure of Homeland Security and follow a link to see a more extensive representation of each unit.

Formal communication consists of both vertical and horizontal communication. Vertical communication consists of upward and downward communication. Traditional upward communication is subordinate to superior and downward communication is traditionally superior to subordinate. Superiors expect upward communication to be timely, positive, and support current policy. Typical upward workplace communication includes project updates, suggestions, and work-related problems

Table 11.1

Techniques for improving upward communication:

- Informal discussions with one or a few employees
- Discussions between higher management and first-level supervisors
- Attitude surveys
- Outside consultants
- Suggestion systems/boxes
- Internal publications with complaint or question/answer columns

Techniques for improving downward communication:

- Small group meetings that value the exchange of information
- Company publications
- Supervisory meetings between managers and direct subordinates
- Mass meetings of employees
- Bulletin boards or posters
- Public address announcements
- Audiovisual presentations including webcasts or podcasts

or issues. Typical downward workplace communication includes task-related directions or instructions. For techniques to improve upward and downward communication see Table 11.1.

Horizontal communication is communication among coworkers with different areas of responsibility or departments considered to be on the same hierarchical level. Horizontal communication is designed to coordinate efforts between employees and groups. In doing this horizontal communication is required to make an organization run more efficiently. Goldhaber (2003) identified four functions of horizontal communication:

- ▶ Problem solving—"It typically takes 3 days for the paint shop to paint a car."
- ▶ Task coordination—"If I get the prep work done on the car can you have it painted in 24 hours?"
- ▶ Information sharing—"The new OSHA laws will require the business to change the way we paint cars. This will require the paint booth to be closed for 48 hours in order to comply with the new law."
- ▶ Conflict resolution—"I've heard that you complained to the owner about my prep work. I would appreciate it if you spoke to me if you're not happy with my work. Can we talk about this?"

Horizontal communication is far more important in an organization whose culture encourages participation.

Informal Communication Networks

Informal communication within organizations is based on career interests, friendships, proximity, and shared personal aspirations (Adler & Elmhorst, 2008). For example, you may share mutual friendships with a coworker or you may attend the same church. Your children may attend the same school or play on the same athletic team as your kids. Coworkers may work out at the same gym or carpool to work. In short, informal communication revolves around a network of close interpersonal relationships that can develop within an organization or even exist prior to organizational workers joining the same organization. In fact, some interpersonal relationships in organizations develop into romantic relationships (Sias & Cahill, 1998).

Four of the most common types of informal communication works to confirm, contradict, expand, and circumvent (Adler & Elmhorst, 2008). Examples of informal communication that confirms formal communication might go like this, "This time they really mean we can't use our e-mail for personal reasons" or "The Internet filters are really tight this time." Second, contradiction includes if your boss sets a deadline and you find out from a senior coworker, "The deadline is Friday, but first thing Monday morning is alright." Senior coworkers are also very useful for expanding on formal communication. For example, if your organization has a casual Friday policy you would want to find out if casual includes jeans or not. A coworker might tell you, "Khakis are fine, but no jeans." Finally, informal communication can work to circumvent formal policies or communication. For example, in my previous life I traveled for an organization and had to complete rather precise expense reports. Occasionally I would lose a receipt or other documentation. Since I was always pleasant to the person that approved all the expenses she would help me out if I just showed my credit card statement from the trip. Other examples of this include knowing the right people to expedite purchase orders, paperwork, or reports.

Another function of informal communication consists of what is traditionally called watercooler talk or the grapevine. This type of informal communication is transmitted quickly and works to supplement formal communication as well as the other forms of informal information-seeking tactics discussed previously. Historically, information transmitted in this manner was believed to be more gossip than truth. However, studies have shown that information transmitted via the grapevine has proven to be quite accurate even though it contains a mix of business and personal messages (Caudron,

1998). Furthermore, organizations have recognized that the grapevine is one aspect of informal communication that allows an organization to function more effectively. In fact, the grapevine has proven to be such an effective communication network, some organizations have tried to encourage informal communication networks by using a management strategy called management by wandering around. This strategy enables managers to engage in the informal communication network and build relationships with organizational personnel that they typically would not communicate with on a regular basis. Clampitt (2005) explains, management by wandering around "helps managers learn about employee attitudes, environment, needs, and desires. This, then, helps managers develop an intuitive understanding of their employees' context of interpretation" (p. 38).

Successful organizations will encourage informal communication among employees and successful professionals tend to do the same. Informal communication networks do not operate solely inside of corporate walls. Most cities have professional networks that allow professionals and interns within organizations to network with other organizations. For example, in 2008 an online forum designed for professionals to network with other business professionals in the Kansas City area started (see <http://kconlinecommunity.com/>). Networking is nothing new. Look at your personal network of family, friends, former and current classmates, coworkers, and even Facebook friends. Then consider the organizations that you are a member of: church, your high school, social organizations on campus, your current and past employers, and your current connections to teachers, students, and alumni as a member of this college. The point is that you are already networked with a variety of professional and personal acquaintances. Cultivate those relationships and build them as you begin to move into your professional life. Personal networks provide numerous benefits to you professionally and personally.

As you expand your personal network keep in mind these commonly cited tips. First, everyone is a possible network connection, from the person sitting next to you on the airplane to the person standing by you in line at the bookstore or even your waiter at the restaurant this weekend. Everyone is a potential contact. Professional and private relationships can initiate anywhere. I have heard of business plans and relationships that became multimillion-dollar deals that started with a conversation in the airport bar or on the airplane.

Second, treat everyone with respect. How you interact with people that you might perceive as not being instrumental to your career is very telling of your character. Tony Kornheiser of ESPN fame, would refer to this type of person as a "little." Be nice to the "littles." Quite a few years ago, I was interviewing for a job and I was sitting in the main office waiting for the next person I was scheduled to visit with. They were running a little late so I struck up a conversation with one of the administrative assistants. I believe he was working on one of the professor's Blackberries and it was not syncing to the professor's calendar. We talked for a few minutes, then he said to me, "You know, it always amazes me that when candidates come through the interview process how few of them actually talk to one of us in the office." He continued, "last year one of the candidates was very rude to me, and I was really glad when they did not get hired." I cannot tell you how detrimental behavior like that could be to your career. Again, every conversation provides a potential networking opportunity, not to mention treating everyone you meet with respect is always good form.

Third, help others. Don't be a drain on a network by only seeking. I call this type of person a mosquito. All they do is suck blood, or information, from a network. They never pay it forward. Whenever possible make an effort to assist others and make sure that you put forth an effort to share information and making sure others benefit from their contact with you. Having a reputation of being generous will serve you well in the future.

Fourth, get a mentor. Mentors can come in the form of formal mentors, assigned by an organization, or informal mentors that you seek out on your own. Regardless of the formal or informal designation of your mentor, you should seek out multiple mentors for your professional life. A mentor will coach, counsel, and guide you through your professional life. Relationships with mentors are not a one-time lunch. It is an ongoing relationship. The golden rule of developing a relationship with a mentor is to respect his or her time. Most successful people are very willing to give back. You

would be surprised how generous many professionals are with their time, but do not abuse this. If they suggest a reading, an activity, or a conference to attend, follow through with their advice. Also, consider the benefits of keeping a regular meeting time with your mentor.

Fifth, seek out secondary contacts or referrals. One of my most recent interactions with a friend in my network consisted of primarily gathering referrals. I was interested in seeking out information about a professional adventure and knew he had some contacts in that area. While attending a conference I invited him to lunch and he provided valuable information and most importantly additional contacts that I was able to contact for informational interviews. He even bought lunch! So you cannot beat that.

A final word on mentoring relationships is that these relationships should be kept professional. Do not expect a mentor to do special favors for you or your family. Mentors are there to help you professionally; they are not a therapist and should not be utilized for your personal issues. If you have serious personal issues you should find a professional counselor. The boundaries between your mentor and you should be clear and respected. Remember any personal insights shared between the two of you should be kept confidential.

The best summary of formal and informal communication networks was presented by Krackhardt and Hanson (1993) who provided the following illustration, "If the formal organization is the skeleton of a company, the informal is the central nervous system" (p. 104). Much like the central nervous system, an organization's informal communication network is faster and typically more dependable than the formal communication network (Kanter, 1989).

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION CHANNEL CHOICE

The task of internal organizational communication remains one of the top priorities of managers in all types of organizations. Dennis and Kinney (1998) reported that more than 50% of a manager's daily tasks involve face-to-face (FtF) communication, plus an additional 33% of their time is consumed with other oral and written communication. Given that managers spend over 80% of their time communicating, it is important to discuss proper channel choice with respect to communicating inside organizations.

The media richness model, or media richness theory, by Daft and Lengel (1986) is based on the organizational information processing theory by Galbraith (1977). This model of communication exchange focuses on understanding the communication activity and identifying uncertainty reduction techniques employed by organizations to manage ambiguity within a message (Fulk, & Boyd, 1991). Accordingly, by understanding the richness and leanness of each communication channel, organizational members will make better choices when coordinating activities through information processing. A lean medium is not able to communicate ambiguous information and is perceived as impersonal when compared to a richer medium such as FtF (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). Richness is defined as "the potential information-carrying capacity of data" (Daft & Lengel, 1984). Thus, if a person were able to increase the potential understanding of a message by delivering it with additional nonverbal cues (i.e., gestures, facial expressions, or proxemics) that message would be considered rich. In contrast, a message that has less understanding would be considered lean or low in richness (Daft & Lengel, 1984).

Daft, Lengel, and Trevino (1987) furthered the definition of richness to include four aspects to distinguish between rich and lean mediums: 1) Feedback—which allows for questioning. 2) Multiple cues—includes nonverbal actions such as facial expressions, proxemics, and gestures. 3) Language variety—referring to the range of meaning that symbolic language is able to convey. 4) Personal focus—the inclusion of personal feelings and emotions to customize a message. Trevino, Lengel, and Daft (1987) added three additional aspects that could influence the way managers select media. These include: the ambiguity of the message, the symbolic cues conveyed by the medium itself, and the situational constraints on symbol processing.

Table 11.2

Media Richness Rankings

Face to face, telephone, and written documents (Daft, & Lengel, 1984 & 1986).
Face to face, telephone, e-mail, and written documents (Trevino, et al., 1987).
Face to face, telephone, meetings, videos, hard copy text, and electronic mail (Rice, 1993).
Face to face, e-mail, telephone, memos, and letters (Sullivan, 1995).

The biggest problem with this line of research is that it focuses, overly so, on media usage and not media choice. Media richness scholars have focused on exploring what types of media would be most effective under what conditions. However, they tend not to discuss how managers could use different media more effectively to communicate within an organization. In fact many of the media richness studies simply report what media managers are using, not what media would be best for specific task communication.

Russ, Daft, and Lengel (1990) are one of the few researchers who have explored managerial choices and preferences when selecting a medium in relation to the equivocality of the message. They found that there was indeed a relationship between a manager's selection of media and the equivocality of the message. Managers were more likely to select a medium that is richer for messages that are equivocal and a leaner medium for messages that were unequivocal (Russ, et al., 1990). The reason that media richness is important to future organizational employees is the increased reliance of managers on electronic communication and texting. While FtF communication is the richest, followed by the telephone (see Table 11.2) e-mail use in organizations continue to increase. Yet, due to the beneficial attributes of e-mail: interactivity, asynchronicity, and increasing reliability, this medium may have more appropriate uses when compared to other mediums.

A final note on media choice and using communication networks in organizations consists of studying the culture of the organization and being conscious of individual choices. The culture of several organizations will dictate what and when certain channels will be appropriate for certain messages. For example, I have read stories that Microsoft is so e-mail intensive that some voicemail greetings state, "If you're from Microsoft, please send electronic mail." However, other organizations prefer voicemail. Media richness tells us that a voicemail is richer in quality and more personal because you can decipher tone of voice and fervor. There is a clear link between the culture of technological firms such as Microsoft or Apple and the preference for electronic communication.

In addition, many people have a personal preference. While some prefer the richer qualities of a voice message, others would prefer the perceived simplicity of an e-mail. Personally, I prefer e-mail to voicemail, and FtF when it is appropriate. I will never forget the boss that sent my performance evaluation over e-mail when we were in the same building, on the same floor, and less than 50 yards away from each other in our respective offices. I printed the report, walked down the hall to her office and had a conversation about my evaluation! Some things need to be performed FtF when at all possible.

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

The concept of organizational culture took business and the academic community by storm in the last thirty years. The speed at which organizational culture emerged as a significant lens for communication scholars and other academics to examine or otherwise engage with organizations and institutions was astounding (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001). The metaphor of culture clearly resonated with both academics and practitioners. It just makes sense to see organizations as a complex arena of stories and values. The culture metaphor opened up new and fruitful areas of research. Organizational culture quickly became a part of everyday talk around watercoolers and in carpools. Many organizational employees started saying "the culture here won't allow us to" or "our culture is work hard, play hard."

Organizational Culture Defined

It is undeniable that organizations exist within cultural environments. In organizational studies the culture that an organization exists within is referred to as the organizational environment. Within each organization there exists a culture that is unique only to that organization. While many organizations have weak cultures, the culture in that organization is still active. Most studies on organizational cultures are typically looking at strong successful cultures (e.g., Southwest Airlines, Disney, Google). To say that an organization's culture has an influence on the communication within an organization is an understatement.

Culture is used to describe groups of people, geographic regions, or localized cultures. Examples include Third World cultures, African-American culture, Hispanic culture, the culture of an inner city, East coast or West coast culture, and even Southern or Southwest cultures. But, we can focus even more on local cultures in cities and towns. Recall Eric Morgan's definition of culture in Chapter 9: "culture is a complex system of symbolic resources, worldviews, values, and norms of appropriate enactment." To frame this definition, with respect to organizational communication, the existence of a culture occurs when people share a common frame of reference for interpreting and acting toward one another and the world in which they live (Papa, Daniels & Spiker, 2008). Organizational culture is reflected in customs, communication, and other observable features on the community, including rites, rituals, celebrations, legends, myths, and heroic sagas.

Over time organizations create their own cultures through symbolic interaction (Mead, 1934). In other words, through organizational communication Giddens (1984) explains that members of a group or organization create and recreate the system that is their social context. In this context, organizational members understand how they should interpret their experiences, which in turn give members a social context for creating organizational meaning. Further, it provides members with a way to change the organization through communication (Papa, Daniels, & Spiker, 2008).

Schein (1990) provided a multidimensional definition of organizational culture. First, culture is "a pattern of basic assumptions." Second, culture is "invented, discovered, or developed by a given group." Third, the group "learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration" that has "worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore is to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (p. 111). A final and very simplistic, but at the same time descriptive definition of organizational culture is, "The way we do things around here" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

In short, the three common characteristics of organizational culture are: (1) It is shared—the members of the culture share common ways of understanding and interpreting organizational phenomena. This does not mean they all think the same way, it means that the organizational culture provides a lens for understanding and interpreting events. (2) It is intangible—it is constructed through human interaction, but it is not concrete at its core. Culture consists of values, assumptions, norms, and frameworks for understanding, none of which are tangible objects. For example, to change a dress code or a daily ritual within an organization is only changing the reflection of the culture and not the culture itself. (3) It affects human behavior—this is one of the more important notions of culture. Organizational culture is not a managerial, financial, or operational decision. It is a construction of human interaction that affects and is affected by the behavior of all members of the organization. Culture provides a lens for interpreting organizational events as members experience them on a day-to-day basis. Organizational culture is obviously very complex.

The Big Picture

The most important concept about organizational culture that you should understand is that the concept of organizational culture provides a lens through which organizational members interpret, interact with, and make sense of organizational reality (Louis, 1980). As a member of a culture you may

have been enculturated with the values and assumptions of the group. As you go through your daily life those values and assumptions help you to make sense of what is going on around you. You tend to learn to make a positive perspective from these cultural assumptions. In order to understand how and why organizational members behave as they do, one must understand the organizational culture that guides and constrains them. By studying the culture of an organization researchers have revealed why Enron failed (watch *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*). Then compare the culture of Enron to those of Google, Disney, or Southwest Airlines (currently the only airline that turns a profit) and you will have an even clearer picture of the importance of a well-developed and ethically based culture.

The Prescriptive View

One of the first ways organizational scholars looked at organizational culture was like a prescription. Deal and Kennedy (1982) found that strong cultures have several features in common and the role of corporate executives is to build a “strong” culture to increase organizational effectiveness and to share organizational expectations. Strong cultures have:

- ▶ *Values*—beliefs and visions that members hold for an organization.
- ▶ *Heroes*—individuals who come to exemplify an organization’s values.
- ▶ *Rites and Rituals*—ceremonies through which an organization celebrates its values.
- ▶ *Cultural Network*—a communication system through which cultural values are instituted and reinforced (Deal & Kennedy, 1982).

By providing this prescription for organizations to follow, many organizations took the ideas of successful companies that were thought to have strong cultures and mimicked them. However, several were unsuccessful. Why? Well, in short, one fix is not always correct, because a culture is the result of the interactions of individuals. In other words, it is a result of the overall health of communication inside an organization and this is not simple to mimic.

A second way to study organizational culture involves recognizing that culture is something an organization is, as opposed to the original approach, which looked at culture as something an organization has. The former being a prescriptive approach and the new view being a descriptive approach. Four issues highlight the distinction between prescriptive and descriptive approaches to culture. First, organizational culture is complicated. Organizational culture simply cannot be reduced to several simple concepts. Scholars have found that culture is revealed through rites of passages, degradation, enhancement, renewal, conflict reduction, and integration (Beyer & Trice, 1987); ceremonies (Dandridge, 1985); values and belief systems (Quinn & McGrath, 1985); metaphors (Smith & Eisenberg, 1987); stories (Boje, 1991; Meyer, 1995); and communication rules (Shockley-Zalabak, 1991; 1994). In short, culture is a highly complex phenomenon.

Second, organizational culture is emergent. Organizational culture is socially created through interactions of members; not merely transmitted through communication. This idea is central to the communicative focus on culture as it is not merely transmitted through communication; communication is “constitutive of culture” (Eisenberg & Riley, 2001, p. 294). Organizational communication is interactional between members, contextually embedded in organizational situations, episodic (nameable as distinct events), and improvisational (there are no scripts that guide organizational members) performances.

Third, culture is not unitary. Organizations do not have a single culture because of the existence of subcultures that may co-exist in harmony, conflict, or indifference to the global organizational culture (Schein, 2010). Martin (2003) states subcultures are emergent from personal contacts or demographic similarity. These subcultures can become a breeding ground for the emergence of shared meaning (Louis, 1980). Recall that culture is constantly being recreated.

Finally, culture is often ambiguous, fragmented, and hard to pin down. This is especially true for organizations that are rapidly changing and adapting to internal or external influences. In fact, several organizational cultures exist in state of flux and are adapting to multiple realities. Examples include: companies that are being acquired, organizations that are merging and the cultures are trying to be merged, or organizations that are subject to extreme government regulation.

The Descriptive View

Now that you understand why the prescriptive approach was flawed, we will look at how you would explore an organizational culture from a descriptive view. Remember, all organizations have a culture, but many will not be as strong as Disney or Pixar, or as visibly different as flying Southwest Airlines compared to American Airlines (which are both based in the same city). To understand the descriptive approach to organizational culture, we need to turn to the scholarship of Edgar Schein and his model of organizational culture.

Schein defines culture as: “a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to those problems” (p. 103). In order to further explore organizational culture, one must understand the three layers that, based on Schein’s (2010) research, will reveal organizational culture.

The key to determining culture is figuring out what is demonstrated by the organizational artifacts and the underlying meaning behind those artifacts, which reveal an organization’s culture. Artifacts are the most visible level of an organization’s culture. However, Schein argued that these elements are very difficult to decipher. Just because something is observable, does not mean that it is the culture. Artifacts include: architecture, furniture, technology, dress, written documents, art, forms of address, decision-making style, communication during meetings, and network configurations. For example, if everyone in an academic department called each other by their formal names such as Professor Smith or Dr. Smith, how would you interpret this observation? Maybe the colleagues hold each other in high esteem. Maybe formality is a rule throughout the university. Perhaps faculty members are trying to set an example for students. Or, perhaps the faculty members dislike each other so intensely they are trying to maintain a distant relationship and therefore call each other by their surname. In short, the outer layer is difficult to decipher.

The second layer is espoused values. This level reveals the organizational preferences for what “ought” to happen and shares those values among all organizational members. Several organizational values may be brought forth from the organizational heroes or founders. For example, many of the values that Wal-Mart still claims to stand for today were principles brought forth by the founder Sam Walton. At Wal-Mart new hires are socialized with the story of Sam Walton and those values that Walton has brought forth. The following are examples of organizational values: An organization that values hard work will expect their employees to put in 60-plus hours a week. And, an organization that values innovation and creativeness will likely be more open to change and will expect their employees to work at improving different facets of the organization.

While it is understood that all members of the organization should share organizational values, we all know that sometimes they do not. For example, an organization may have an open door policy and emphasize the value of horizontal communication. But, your boss may not have an open door. He or she may have a “figurative” open door and through understanding the organizational culture for your workgroup (some would consider this a subculture) you understand that you are not supposed to go in the office without an appointment. Another example of espoused values might be equality. For example, I am sure you have noticed how parking permits are assigned at many universities and organizations. If equality is the value set forth by leadership, why do some employees get

priority parking, like professors and administrators on many campuses? Or, is parking open and first arrival gets the closest spot to the door? Just because the leadership of an organization articulates a value does not mean it is a “real” value of the organization.

The relationship between level one and two is that values are inherently intangible, cognitive constructed and not always articulated by organizational members. In this way, values may or may not be “visible” in artifacts and behaviors. Other times, organizational members may articulate a value that contradicts the artifacts and behaviors of the artifacts. In this case you are looking at a “fantasy value.”

The final level is that of the core assumptions that organizational members hold about the world and how it works. These assumptions tend to be taken for granted because they have been reinforced time and time again as the organization or group deals with internal and external problems. These assumptions are uniformly held and reveal “the way we are” or “the way we do things around here.” The six assumptions are the nature of: reality and truth, time, space, human nature, human activity, and human relationships. All six assumptions deal with how organizational members view the world, they are not a function of an organization.

The nature of reality and truth looks to determine what is real and how reality is determined. The second assumption, the nature of time, deals with the symbolic nature that people use for talking about orderliness of social life. Las Cruces, and New Mexico in general, is often joked to be the land of mañana. I was once asked by a new resident of Las Cruces, “I know this is the land of mañana, but does that really mean one year?” Several of us laughed and replied, maybe! However, time is critical because it is invisible, taken for granted, but at the same time imposes social order. The third assumption, the nature of space, incorporates symbolic meaning. Recall earlier in Chapter 3 we discussed the physical space, the nature of space also incorporates the social meaning of space, which includes the use of walls or office partitions. Further, symbols of space include who has how much space or the decoration of office space. Finally, space also consists of body language, also discussed in Chapter 3. The fourth assumption, the nature of human nature, includes the basic human instincts, the determination of inhuman behavior. Human nature is inherently complex and even changes with life cycles as individuals mature. The fifth assumption, the nature of human activity or how humans act in relation to their environment. The final assumption, the nature of human relationships, encompasses several approaches to how individuals develop and maintain interpersonal relationships inside the organization. All six assumptions deal with how organizational members view the world, they are not a function of an organization (Schein, 2010).

These assumptions are not specific to organizational culture, but revolve around how people view the world and humanities relationship to it. Schein (2010) believes that examination of these assumptions reveal a coherent paradigm that guides a strong and united culture. However, the cultural assumptions might be fragmented and contradictory, thus revealing a problem of adapting to external and internal organizational problems. Regardless, it is important to explore the underlying assumptions of any group or organization in an attempt to identify the paradigm from which the group views organizational life. But remember, one cannot claim to have described or understood the group’s culture unless they have made a significant time commitment to the organization. In short, organizational culture, much like social culture, is deep, wide, very complex and covers all aspects of life.

Can an organizational culture exist if a group of individuals do not agree on the six assumptions above? Absolutely. However, the result will be a fragmented culture that is not a strong culture. In addition, lack of agreement among organizational members on these assumptions is more likely to result in the existence of several possibly dysfunctional subcultures.

While Schein’s model can be viewed as an oversimplified reality of organizational culture and the role of communication in creating and sustaining that culture it is an important descriptive approach to culture. At a time when researchers and theorists increasingly see culture as a fragmented and often ambiguous phenomenon, Schein’s model can bring clarity to this complexity. Schein’s model

provides a helpful heuristic view for looking at the multiple indicators of organizational culture and how these indicators might, or might not, be indicative of more enduring values and assumptions of an organization.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Organizations exist within environmental and cultural influences. There is little argument that culture also exists within organizations (Papa et al., 2008). However, to fully understand how an organization works (much less why) organizational members must make themselves aware of both influences. Nothing outstanding may be seen in either type of culture initially, but as a “peon” or “little” when you enter an organization, few cultural factors will reveal themselves as you initially see them. For this reason, I encourage you to use Schein’s model for exploring organizational culture so you will be open and aware of the communication networks and the culture that influences all of your organizational interactions.

References

- Adler, R. B. & Elmhorst, J. M. (2008). *Communicating at work: Principles and practices for business and the professions* (9th ed). Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Beyer, J. M. & Trice, H. M. (1987). How an organization’s rites reveal its culture. *Organizational Dynamics*, 15, 5–24.
- Boje, D. M. (1991). The storytelling organization: A study of story performance in an office-supply firm. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 36, 106–126.
- Brummer, J. J. (1991). *Corporate responsibility and legitimacy: An interdisciplinary analysis*. New York: Greenwood.
- Caudron, S. (1998). They hear it through the grapevine. *Workforce*, 77, 25–27.
- Conrad, C. (1985). *Strategic organizational communication*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Clampitt, P. G. (2005). *Communicating for managerial effectiveness* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Daft, R. & Lengel, R. (1984). Information richness: A new approach to managerial information processing and organizational design. In B. Staw & L. Cummings (Eds.), *Research in organizational behaviors* (pp. 191–233). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Daft, R. L., & Lengel, R.H. (1986). Organizational information requirements, media richness and structural design. *Management Science*, 32, 554–571.
- Daft, R. L., Lengel, R. H., & Trevino, L. K. (1987). Message equivocality media selection, and manager performance: Implications for information systems. *MIS Quarterly*, 11, 355–366.
- Dandridge, T. C. (1985). The life stages of a symbol: When symbols work and when they can’t. In P. J. Frost, L. F. Moore, M. R. Louis, C. C. Lundberg, & J. Martin (Eds.), *Organizational culture* (pp. 141–153). Beverly Hills: Sage.
- Deal, T. E. & Kennedy, A. A. (1982). *Corporate cultures: The rites and rituals of corporate life*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.
- Dennis, A. R., & Kinney, S. T. (1998). Testing media richness theory in the new media: The effects of cues, feedback, and task equivocality. *Information Systems Research*, 9, 256–274.
- Eisenberg, E. M., & Riley, P. (2001). Organization culture. In F. M. Jablin & L. L. Putnam (Eds.), *The new handbook of organizational communication: Advances in theory, research, and methods* (pp. 291–317). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.